

The exciting times of a sporting newspaper

BY CHARLIE MULQUEEN

THOSE OF you who saw the appalling condition of the Markets Field pitch and complain each week at the rather spartan conditions for spectators may well be surprised to learn that Limerick sport depended almost exclusively on the Garryowen "stadium" for the best part of half a century.

From the earliest days of organised sport in the mid-1870s, the Markets Field has been a focal point for sport in the region and is still, of course, the headquarters of Greyhound Racing and Racing and League of Ireland soccer in the city.

Long before the major associations like the G.A.A., the I.R.F.U., the Racing Board, the F.A.I. and so on were set up, sport was well established in Limerick. The columns of the Limerick Leader and Limerick Chronicle carry graphic accounts of many sporting engagements, the earliest dating back to the activities of the Limerick Athletic and Bicycle Club, a body closely identified with the gentry and upper classes.

Road races

They held many famous road races from 1875 onwards and around this time, too, the Limerick Handball Club was flourishing at its courts in Rutland St. behind the Town Hall.

Our first G.A.A. club, Limerick Commercials, came on the scene in 1883—the year before the founding of the G.A.A.—and they operated at the Grocers Field on the Ennis Road, now the site of Lansdowne Terrace. The opposition came chiefly from the old Limerick Butchers, and matches were also played on the site of the old Balinacorra Racecourse.

The arrival of the G.A.A. and of Garryowen Rugby Club in 1884 saw the Markets Field come into its own as a sporting venue. The now-defunct Limerick County R.F.C. played there before Garryowen, but the Markets Field quickly became identified with the "light blues" as a rugby arena on Sundays and as a hurling venue on Saturdays when Young Ireland had the rights. Such traffic inevitably took its toll of the playing surface, a problem compounded by the fact that circuits and carnivals were frequently staged in mid-week and

sawdust and the droppings of various animals—such as elephants—added to the difficulty.

Same posts

Although the "foreign games" rule was very much in vogue around the turn of the century, the two "tenant" clubs at the Markets Field used to share the same goalposts, just moving them around to suit their own requirements. The Markets Field remained the chief hurling venue in Limerick right up to and indeed after the opening of the Limerick Gaelic Grounds on the Ennis Road in 1927-'28.

Two famous Munster finals were staged there—the Tipperary-Cork clash of 1925 before a record crowd and the meeting of Limerick and Tipp. in '23 in the final of '22. The teams played a draw in a splendid game at Thurles but the re-play at the Markets Field was an ill-tempered affair and a number of players were injured. Tipperary won but lost in the All-Ireland final to Kilkenny.

It should be noted that there was no greyhound track in those days (this arrived in 1937) but even though there was much greater playing space than is the case today, the ground was still too small and restricted for hurling. Yet rugby continued to thrive there. The 1905 All Blacks under the captaincy of Dave Gallagher gave Munster a right old hammering at the Markets Field and every major fixture allotted to the city—be it a cup tie or Interprovincial—took place there.

Strange

In view of the game's popularity to-day, it is strange indeed that soccer should have played a very small part in the sporting life of Limerick before and after the turn of the century. It was, of course, looked upon as "a garrison sport" and was confined almost entirely to the British forces.

Indeed Limerick's League of Ireland club didn't come along until 1937 and where did they immediately set up home... only at the Markets Field? Pressure on the old venue had been much eased by the departure of rugby to Thomond Park in 1935 and of Gaelic Games to their new home on the Ennis Road. That move took place in 1927-'28, and the work put into the grounds at that time isn't fully appreci-

ated to-day. The pitch now is one of the best anywhere, but in the early days there was a towering hill that was cleared in loads and loads of earth, stone, rock, etc., in horse cart. This was later to comprise the fine banking on the "far" side. First big match at the venue was the clash of Clare and Galway in the semi-final of the All-Ireland in 1932, won by Clare who overcame a massive half time deficit thanks mainly to a great second half performance by the legendary "Tull" Considine. Sadly, Clare lost in the final to Kilkenny.

Facilities at the venue gradually improved, but there was still no stand when the never-to-be-repeated 60,000 plus crowds thronged the ground in the early fifties for a succession of Cork-Tipp. Munster finals.

Tremendous

So, in a brief way, that's how the various sports evolved in Limerick. The pages of the "Leader" and "Chronicle" are alive with reports of the great deeds of the hurlers, rugbymen, soccer players, athletes, jockeys, and horses, hockey men and women, and so on and on. They have given tremendous pleasure for more than a century, and hopefully will continue to do so in the years ahead.

Each sport has enjoyed its glory days. Rugby's greatest day may well have been as recent as October 31st, 1978, when Munster beat the All Blacks at Thomond Park by 12 pts. to nil, although Young Munster would suggest that their victory over Lansdowne in the Bateman Cup final of 1928 was even more significant. Limerick's first All-Ireland triumph was achieved under the captaincy of Dan Grimes in 1897, and they repeated the act in 1918 and 1921 before really hitting the high spots in the thirties.

The great teams that won the All-Ireland titles of 1934, 1936 and 1940, and the National League five years in a row from 1934 will forever hold a special place in the hearts of all Limerickmen. Men like Ned Cregan, Mick Kennedy, Micky Cross, Paddy Clobessy, Timmy Ryan, John and Mick Mackey, Jackie O'Connell, Paddy Scanlon and Jackie Power, to name but a few, are legendary figures to this day.

Scribes' feast

Those glory days provided a wealth of material for the "Leader" scribes and how well

they feasted off them. The files of the newspaper came alive with the stirring deeds of these great men, at home and abroad, for they enjoyed a highly successful tour of the United States as well.

There was many a lean year afterwards, but the 70's were good years for Limerick followers, with a 7th League success in 1971 followed by the county's first All-Ireland in 33 years when Kilkenny were conquered in the final of 1973.

Gaelic football has traditionally been the "poor relation" of hurling, but the early days of the association saw Limerick in the ascendancy and they won the All-Ireland Championship of 1887 (the first ever played) and 1896. Alas, ever since Limerick has been very much in the doldrums in football and as I write there is absolutely nothing to indicate that your "Leader" will resound to any heroic deeds in this code in the foreseeable future.

Not so soccer, however, with, as I write, Limerick A.F.C. poised to bring off the League-Cup double for the first time in their history. They endured many heartaches and near misses through the 30's and 40's before finally clinching a major title, the Shield, in 1953. There was another protracted spell in the wilderness before the coveted League title was clinched in 1960 and there was another eleven year wait until Cup success in 1971.